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SOUTH AMERICAN THUNDERBIRDS

By ALFRED MÉTRAUX

As South American folklore becomes better known, more and more parallels are being discovered between its themes and those of the mythology of the North American Indians. Several references to thunderbirds are brought together here as a contribution to these comparative studies, which were initiated forty years ago by Ehrenreich.

The Thunder god of modern Guaraní—the Cainguá of Paraguay and Southern Brazil—is Tupā, who was engendered by Ñanderuvuçu, “Our Great Father.” He sits far away in the west on a wooden bench “similar to the middle part of a canoe.” He has wavy hair and wears a rosin labret. Whenever he is called by his mother, Ñandeçý, “Our Mother,” he turns his bench upside down, sits in it and, accompanied by two guards, the yvyraijá, he crosses the sky toward the east, causing thunder. Lightning is produced by the shaking of his labret. When he lands at the house of his mother, the thunder dies away but the flashes of his labret can still be seen. Tupā’s companions, the yvyraijá, are said to be tesoura birds (*Muscivora tyrannus*) that fly to and fro before a storm. According to the Guaraní, they have the power of summoning the rain clouds and for this reason shamans wear the tail feathers of these birds in their diadems (Nimuendajú 323).

According to the Ashluslay Indians of the Paraguayan Chaco, thunder and lightning are produced by birds who have long, sharp beaks and who carry fire under their wings. The thunder is their cry and lightning the fire which they drop over the earth. They were also the owners of fire and their enmity against mankind began after they had been deprived of that element. This happened as follows:

Once upon a time some famished and half frozen men smelt a pleasant odor. They came to a dry red tree around which they found many steaming snails. An Indian touched one, but dropped it immediately because it was so hot that it burned his fingers. At that very moment he saw a thunderbird snatch the snail and eat it. The Indian picked up another snail and discovered that its taste was pleasant. The Indians then decided to steal fire from the thunderbirds. When the thunderbird saw that fire had been taken away from him, he returned to his companions and told them what had happened. The birds resented men’s theft so much that since then they have become their worst enemies. They terrify them with their cries (thunder), produce sparks with their wings (lightning), and throw thunderbolts at men and tall trees. The birds also open a container full of water and provoke rain and floods (Alarcon y Cañedo 81).

A myth, identical to the last detail to that of the Ashluslay, was collected by Grubb (98–9) among the Lengua, immediate neighbors of the Ashluslay.

A similar conception of thunder must have obtained among the Choroti, linguistically and culturally related to the Ashluslay. Karsten (31) states that they

believe that thunder and the flash of lightning are caused by a great number of mohsek [spirits] who are rushing through the air and making onset upon the village. These spirits are more often called ahuéna, “the birds,” and thunder and lightning are there-

fore generally called by the Indians simply *ahuéna*, although the proper name in the Choroti language is *súntini*.

A Chané myth collected by Nordenskiöld (251-3) suggests the existence of the Thunderbird in the folklore of these Arawakan Indians of the northern Chaco. *Aña-tunpa*, the Great Spirit, calls on a poor man to whom he gives a pair of wings telling him that "whenever he arrives at a village he has only to flap them and it will thunder." The man goes to a village where the people refuse to receive him. Three times he flaps his wings and each time it thunders. Finally he lifts his wings and unleashes a storm which destroys the village and exterminates its inhabitants.

The Thunderbird concept existed among the ancient Cariri Indians, a "Tapuya" tribe, of the Brazilian coast. During the celebration of the Yarema cult, the intoxicated Indians could see the Thunderbird shooting lightning from a huge tuft on his head and producing claps of thunder by running about (Nimuendaju's ms.).

In a myth of the Caxinaua Indians of the Juruá region we find the following passage literally translated from the native text:

Icã—a spirit who was the owner of the sun—walked with the *xexéu* bird. The *xexéu* bird came to take a walk with Icã. He was coming, it was becoming dark. It was dark. It thundered during the whole day. . . . The *xexéu* bird entered Icã's house. Icã asked, "Have you arrived, *xexéu* bird?" *Xexéu* bird answered, "I came to take a walk with you." Icã said, "*Xexéu* bird, come in." He said, "*Xexéu* you are coming. It is becoming dark. It is dark. It thunders all the time. Rain is about to fall. Why are you causing darkness?" The *xexéu* bird answered, "There is no sun in my house. In my house there is only darkness. Whenever I arrive, it begins to darken. It thunders during the whole day. Rain is about to fall. Don't you see?" The *xexéu* bird returned to his house. It was no more dark. It did not thunder any longer. The rain did not fall. Everything was clear and pretty. . . . The *xexéu* bird dances in his house. He gathers his people and dances with them. Many are gathered, many are dancing. The *Urubu* (who had stolen the Sun) says, "I am going to see them." When the *xexéu* birds dance, it becomes dark. The *Urubu* goes to see them. Many birds are gathered and they dance. The *Urubu* alights among them, but when they see him, they cannot stand his stench. They all scatter. The Sun appears. The birds scatter. They leave. It is becoming clear. The Sun shines. When the *xexéu* birds dance, the *Urubu* goes to see them and when the *Urubu* arrives, this is how the *xexéu* birds act. The *Urubu* stole the sun from Icã because Icã did not want to give it to him. Cold belongs to the *Urubu*, darkness as well as rain is the property of the *xexéu* birds (Capistrano de Abreu 450-53).

It is obvious that the *xexéu* birds represent the clouds which draw together and then scatter as soon as the Sun—brought by Icã or the *Urubu*—reappears.

The Caxinaua have another explanation for thunder and lightning. They attribute these phenomena to the Lightning people. Their chief is a hairless man with a red head whose sons have red hair. When the chief beats his children, thunder is heard, but when he sleeps, lightning crisscrosses the sky without any noise. The same Indians have another interpretation of the phenomenon: Above us there are small people who hack the sky with their

axes, making the noise which we hear as thunder. These people would destroy the sky but celestial ants always fill the cracks which they open (Capistrano de Abreu 429).

Thunder is one of the most important spirits of the Cayapa Indians of Ecuador. Barrett (2: 360-61) says that according to some informants

the thunders are two, a male and a female; they somewhat exceed in size the average spirit, and have light-blue bodies covered with coarse hair somewhat like hog-bristles. The thunder spirits wear no clothing and do not paint their bodies; they have large blue wings on which they fly from place to place, and the flapping of which causes the detonation we call thunder. They have no special abode, but frequent certain places more than others.

Some other Cayapa informants, however, deny that the Thunder spirits are birds, and visualize them as giants dressed in blue.

In the Guianas and in the West Indies the thunderbird seems to have been identified with a constellation. According to the Wapisiana

the beginning of the long dry season is announced by the first appearance of wakarasab, the egret, a constellation which includes Gemini, Cancer, and Leo. He is flying after Baukur with outspread wings. This is the time of high winds, lightning and thunder. The noise of the winds is like that made by the wings of the egret. The rains are past and the mornings are roseate (Farabee 102).

The ancient Island Caribs regarded a star as the tangible representation of a mythical heron (crabier) who was the "Captain of hurricanes and of Thunder" and who caused heavy rains. The Ursa major was the canoe of the heron. In Yaruro folklore this constellation is associated with storms and thunder.

It is therefore possible that other South American thunderbirds are linked with groups of stars which appear in the sky before the rainy season (Lehmann-Nitsche 121-32).

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